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The New Europe / Old Boundaries: British migrants in Spain

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History

British people have been migrating to Spain's coastal areas in increasing numbers since the 1960s, when the growth of mass tourism led to the development and expansion of resorts with special attraction for the British visitor. During the early 1960s, the increase in real disposable incomes of northern Europeans, the increase in leisure time and paid holidays experienced by workers across the social scale, and developments in transport which made travelling long distances cheaper and more comfortable, all contributed to a rapid growth in international tourism which sparked off, in Spain, a building boom of hotels and apartment blocks (Jenkins 1991; MacCannell 1996; Punnett 1990). By the late 1960s tourism was a mass phenomenon, with Spain as a favourite destination (Burkart and Medlik 1974). The phenomenon of the all-inclusive package tour was crucial, and was especially big business for the United Kingdom. But mass tourism is a form of mass consumption and tends to be highly spatially polarised. It tends to result in the creation of entire cities or towns being built 'solely for consumption' (Shaw and Williams 1994). The Mediterranean regions were notably affected and so new resorts like Fuengirola and Torremolinos sprouted almost overnight.

This period of intense visiting by British people to Spanish resorts marked the beginning of what was later to become a mass migration trend. A few Britons settled in the resorts more permanently in the 1960s but these were in a minority at least until after the death of Franco in 1975. Then, through the 1970s, more and more Britons visited each year, some staying longer, returning, and eventually buying second homes (King and Rybaczuk 1993). However, during the 1980s Spain's administration became aware of the very seasonal and regional nature of tourism which brought a downward spiral in incomes each winter and so, in order to compensate for this, began actively to encourage foreign investment in Spain and foreign purchase of land and property (Jurdao 1990; Valenzuela 1988). Land and property were cheap in Spain compared with Britain (and other northern European countries) and developers capitalised on this new market, building cheap, high-rise, often poorly constructed blocks of apartments in an unregulated fashion in many of the most popular resorts (Davey 1990). Urbanisations (new, densely-concentrated developments of small and larger villas) sprang up in a spontaneous and often unplanned manner in and around these same resorts (Jurdao 1990; Pearce 1995).

At this time, Britain was experiencing an economic boom, a massive growth in the property market, and an increase in expendable wealth for many traditionally lower and lower-middle class individuals. For the first time many more people had money to spend on second homes, which, with the lengthening of holidays from work or on retirement, they could visit for longer and longer periods. Others were able to sell properties in Britain, making huge profits with which to buy first homes upmarket in a cheaper Spain, buying themselves a higher standard of living to retire to, or buying themselves an income in the way of small businesses serving the tourists and newly settled communities of expatriates. There was a snowball effect. During the mid 1980s the exchange rate fluctuated at around 200 pesetas to the pound sterling, reaching 220 pesetas to the pound at one point in 1985. Tourists were, by now, flocking to Spain in large numbers and, attracted by the low prices, good exchange rates, the sun and sea, and the increasingly welcoming infrastructure of the tourist

areas, began to consider Spain as a place to live. In Fuengirola, and places like it, many Britons became aware of the employment opportunities so many British tourists provided, and started to set up services: car hire, bars, restaurants, laundries, letting agents and, later, estate agencies. Individuals began to settle in the area in search of work within these industries with their beautiful surroundings and seemingly relaxed way of life. By this time it was generally accepted that this had become a mass phenomenon (O'Reilly 2000).

During the 1990s, a recession in Britain together with the slump in the property market abated the flow of Britons who had previously been able to sell at huge profits in Britain and buy more cheaply in Spain. The peseta gained strength against the pound sterling for a time, and Spain was not such an attractively cheap option for either tourists or migrants. But the flow has not been stemmed entirely. The peseta is currently weak again against the pound sterling and recent figures from estate agents dealing in foreign properties estimate a 400 per cent increase in purchase of Spanish property during 1999-2000.

The extent of the phenomenon

Several authors have recognised the problems of obtaining 'hard' data on this relatively new trend in migration, both because little research has been done and because official statistics do not reflect the different migration trends within the main trend (King et al 1998, O'Reilly 1995, Rodríguez et al 1998, Valenzuela 1988, Warnes 1991). Similarly, existing statistics are both difficult to obtain and to trust because of the fluidity and unofficial nature of the migrant population. The best anyone can offer is a range of statistics from a variety of sources, but with the caveat that figures are not from comparable sources: each estimate below refers to a slightly different group of individuals, ranging from foreign nationals in Spain to Britons in the village of Mijas. However, the effects at the local level are often more important than the quantifiable significance of trends. British migration to Spain has significant local effects, not only in terms of retirement migration, which has drawn the attention of some researchers (King et al. 1998; Rodríguez et al. 1998), but also the temporary and permanent migration of younger and working groups. In other words, we should acknowledge that however difficult it is to quantify, this migration trend is significant (King et al. 1998), important (Rodríguez et al. 1998) and consequential, (Mullan 1993);

The examples which follow demonstrate the variation between estimates but also give some clue as to the extent of British migration to Spain and to the Fuengirola area in particular. The village of Mijas, for example, is very aware of the extent of its (elderly) migrant population. Two social researchers have written polemically about their concerns that the increase in elderly people will strip the area of its economic and natural resources. They begin with the tourist urbanisations (where many migrants settle) which are 'like oil slicks rhythmically extending further and further into the coastline demolishing everything in their way' and go on to suggest Spain is becoming Europe's asylum for the elderly (Jurdao and Sanchez 1990). They hazarded a guess that over 25,000 Britons were living in Mijas in 1990, a village whose total population at the time numbered only 36,000! This might have been something of an overestimate; only 6,500 British residents appeared in Mijas Council census figures in 1994. However, there were 34,000 Britons registered with the British consulate as resident in the Malaga area in 1993.

In June 1999 *The Entertainer* reported that there were 600,000 English-speaking foreigners living in Southern Spain. In Fuengirola itself, the 1991 census figures show only 987 Britons as resident in an area with a population of approximately 47,000 residents; a population which, incidentally, doubles in the summer months due to the massive influx of visitors. But local officials and commentators offer estimates of between a few hundred and a few thousand Britons actually resident in Fuengirola, depending on the time of year (see Elliott 1993). This issue of how many are resident at different times of the year is a crucial one and of much more relevance for the local officials and businesses who have to prepare for and cope with seasonal flows which affect the supply of services, the extent of custom, and other things such as security and crime control.

Figures for the whole of Spain are very variable. C. Bel Adell (1989) estimated almost 47 thousand British residents in Spain in 1986 and 73 thousand by 1989. According to European Commission figures, 86 thousand Britons were living in Spain in 1991; while various reports estimated that by 1994 there were between 100 and 300 thousand (see Creffield 1995, Lore 1994). In 1993 the consulate in the Costa Blanca suggested a figure of 25,000 for retired Britons living in his area alone (Age Concern 1993). However, at least a million foreign nationals own property in Spain's coastal areas, according to Valenzuela (1988).

Forms Of Mobility

In 1993 I moved to Spain to conduct 15 months fieldwork as a member of a British expatriate community. That research plus material gained over the years during frequent return visits provide the material for this paper. The research was concentrated in the Fuengirola area and the villages of Los Boliches and Mijas and was initiated at a time when the British in Spain, particularly those in this area, had become something of a media phenomenon (see O'Reilly 2000c).

One of the first things I discovered about the British in Spain is that it is difficult to talk about them simply as expatriates or emigrants because, while some people migrate permanently and full-time, others move peripatetically backwards and forwards during the year. Even the simple distinction between tourism and migration is complicated here by the fluid nature of the movement of people across national boundaries and between permanent and temporary homes. Russell King and his colleagues, who have made a large scale study of International Retirement Migration in Europe (King et al. 1998: 100) have been forced to admit that residence patterns are so fluid that the very concept of 'permanent place of residence' is inadequate: 'an understanding of the spatial patterns of residence will increasingly require space and time dimensions' they conclude. However, the forms of movement can be loosely grouped into 'ideal types' based on a combination of an individual's sense of commitment or orientation to one or other country and on amount of time spent in one or other place of residence. There are three main groups - residents, visitors and tourists - but the non-tourists are further subdivided into *Full* and *Returning Residents*, and *Seasonal* and *Peripatetic Visitors*.

The *Full Residents* are individuals who have moved to the area permanently. They generally identify as living in Spain and often state they have no intention to ever return to live in their home country. Individuals in this group would fit comfortably into the category of 'migrant' as used by demographers, sociologists and geographers. Many own property or a business in Spain, while others rent their homes there. Many

are retired but an equally large number are working in Spain. This is a numerically significant group, with an average age possibly in the forties.

Returning Residents are resident in Spain as regards home, orientation and legal status. This group is made up of a majority of retired or economically independent individuals who, although they usually consider they now live in Spain, return to Britain each summer for anything from two to five months to escape the searing heat and overwhelming crowds of a Costa del Sol summer. Their return 'home' often provides the opportunity for these people to spend time with their families. Many of this group own homes in Spain, but a significant number rent property in the form of apartments and small villas. A number of them own a second home, or a 'mobile' home on a residential plot, in Britain, enabling their seasonal return, while others rely on friends and relatives to supply accommodation during their visits. This group is older than others on average.

In addition to the Full Residents and Returning Residents, a large number of migrants live in Britain but return to Spain each winter attracted by, amongst other things, low accommodation rentals, cheap leisure, the welcome of the established British community, and the health benefits of avoiding a harsh British winter. I label this group *Seasonal Visitors*. They are almost always retired individuals, and couples, who own property in Britain and who may also own property in Spain. Their winter stay can last anything from a couple of months to six months each year, and is not always taken in one trip: many return to Britain for the Christmas period, for example. The qualitative difference between this group and the *Residents* is in their orientation, which tends more towards 'home' than 'host' country. However, they tend to have emotional ties and commitments in Spain and often spend enough time there for the visit to be much more than an inversion of what is their normal life or routine. Though their visit to Spain does not involve a clearly defined change of permanent residence, they are migrants rather than tourists. The average age of this group is in the sixties.

The fourth group, *Peripatetic Visitors*, usually own second homes in Fuengirola or the surrounding area, and visit when they can. This visiting may have no pattern or routine to it and may be dictated by business or work in either Britain or Spain, by health, wealth or by family commitments. This group has a lower average age than the Resident and Seasonal Visitor groups, possibly in the fifties or younger. The orientation of the members is often divided between Britain and Spain; with either country variously being considered 'home'. Because of business commitments, women are able to visit Spain more often than men. Commitments such as property, family, friends and work in Spain mean their visits amount to more than leisure, travel or tourism. Though I have labelled them as visitors rather than residents (since they usually do not have or need residence permits) they identify themselves as migrants rather than tourists.

Full Residents, Returning Residents, Seasonal Visitors and Peripatetic Visitors are all migrants because their intention and orientation go beyond seeing Spain as a holiday destination. They are migrants because they are not tourists. If tourism is always temporary and is defined in terms of what it is not (work, home and so on), then migration, for the migrants to Fuengirola introduced above, is something more than tourism or travel, more than an inversion of the 'normal' (Urry 1990). On the other hand, tourists are a ubiquitous part of the British community in Spain, and many of the representations of the British conflate migrants and tourists into a single category. The crucial difference is their orientation to home. Whereas some *Peripatetic Visitors* consider 'home' to be in Spain, tourists identify as being in the

area specifically for a holiday. They are not migrants. They might own a small apartment in the area and may return to it once or twice each year thereby building networks and relationships with members of the other groups of migrant, but their orientation is towards their country of origin. This group includes all ages but Fuengirola tends, these days, to attract young families and middle-aged couples rather than young, single tourists.

Age of migrants

A further crucial finding of this piece of research is related to the age of the migrants. So much attention has been given to the elderly migrants (see O'Reilly 2000b) that one gets the impression that all the British in Spain are old. In fact, many of the migrants are much younger than retirement age and many people (increasingly) are moving their entire families to Spain; their children attending school and the younger people seeking work. The Seasonal Visitor and Returning Resident groups discussed above are generally retired people, but Full Residents are often younger and include young people in their twenties who migrate independently of their families. In fact, in June 1999, the English-language newspaper, the *Sur in English*, claimed that the age of its readership is coming down as increasing numbers of working-age people join the community. Similarly, labelling the migrants as retirees is problematic, since many older migrants of retirement age are working in Spain, while young migrants may well have retired early as part of the migration. Furthermore, those migrants who are older insist that the experience of ageing in this context is so different to what it would have been if they had stayed home that they cannot be subjected to the same sets of analyses and concepts as are applied to 'the elderly' generally. The elderly is often a negative term denoting a physical or mental state and attended by ageist stereotypes to the extent that 'we see elderly people only in terms of their diseases, disabilities and deprivations' (Fennel et al. 1988: 7). Elderly people are seen as frail, or as a burden: attitudes which inform books like *Espana: Asilo de Europa* (Jurdao and Sanchez 1990) which describes the invasion of Europe by an onslaught of elderly people who will inevitably drain the country of resources. Sensationalist press reports have tended to equate being elderly in Spain with loneliness, disability, ill health, poverty, or all of these (see Boseley 1993; Fletcher 1994; MacKinnon 1993), and some members of the migrant community have contributed to these stereotypes. But, on the contrary, older people in Spain are less likely to be a burden than they might have been, the migrants argue; most want to stress the benefits of living in Spain.

Older migrants in Spain are healthier, thanks to the warmth and the opportunities for walking and fresh air. They are more active: there are numerous leisure activities in which they can take part and mobility is eased by the warmth. They feel that in Spain they are an accepted part of mainstream society, not some marginal group, like they are in Britain. They feel that there is less ageism and less stigma about age in Spain. And an important finding in light of recent discussions in Britain is that they do not feel that the Health Service discards them as they age as it does back home: 'they give you all the same tests as they give younger people' one woman told me 'and yet in England they don't bother with old people there'. In short, older British people in Spain feel they have a better way of life than they would have in Britain.

Reasons for migration

It is the search for a new way of life that has prompted many of the migrants to leave Britain, be it permanently, seasonally or peripatetically. Reasons, or post-hoc

justifications (because 'reasons' are often exactly this rather than actual causes) that people gave for migrating to Spain can be separated into two distinct categories: those which say negative things about life in Britain and those which say positive things about life in Spain. Some of these negative factors, such as a divorce, redundancy, high crime rates in their area, provided a specific trigger to the move, but people could usually list several things about Britain which caused them to decide to 'get out'. 'England is so depressing these days. It's cold and grey, and everyone is miserable', one woman insisted when I asked her why she had moved to Spain.

At the same time, these push factors were often balanced with pull factors: those positive things about Spain which drew them to the country. These in turn can be separated into 'natural' resources including the climate and the landscape, things offered by the settled British community, such as social clubs, leisure opportunities and a welcoming community, and things offered by the Spanish community, such as respect for children and the elderly, friendliness, warmth, security and a slow pace of life.

Malcolm and Linda, for example, moved to Spain when Malcolm took early retirement from the military. They have lived in several different countries but finally settled on Spain for a variety of reasons. I asked what it was about Spain that attracted them and Linda said enthusiastically 'the people, they are so friendly; and the climate ... and the pace of life, being able to take your time over things - everyone is in such a hurry in England these days; the *ferias* and *fiestas*; and having time'. Malcolm added 'everything takes longer here... and we like it that way. This is what we wanted from retirement -to relax more, to get up later, spend more time together...' During another conversation, Malcolm ventured to suggest that actually what attracts people to Spain has little to do with the Spanish 'as long as there is the sun and the slow pace of life we could be anywhere in the world' he said.

Another ex-military couple, Peter and Mary, told me that Spain (or Fuengirola at least) is relatively free of street crime and muggings and is therefore a safer place for both young and old. 'Children play out until midnight here, and no one is worried. And what is so wonderful is that you see the big kids and the little ones playing together, and the boys and girls'. Lillian and Tommy, who had moved to Spain when, close to retirement age, they had both been made redundant, added some of these positive things to their list of reasons for moving. 'The slow pace of life here is a big attraction', Tommy told me. 'Life here consists of doing nothing...Everything takes longer here, you don't do anything much but the day's gone before you know it. If you can achieve one thing in the day you should be proud of yourself' he said. 'Yes, it's no good trying to rush anything here, you will just end up frustrated' Lillian confirmed.

One evening I attended a Royal British Legion dinner and dance. My partner and I were seated at a table with three other couples and a single woman. As we each introduced ourselves the inevitable questions about how long we had been in Spain and whether we lived there permanently were asked. Upon hearing about my research the others began to enthuse about why they had left Britain and why they loved Spain. They complained about the poor weather in Britain, enthused about the relaxing pace of life in Spain, told me excitedly about the cheap leisure opportunities and the numerous social clubs in Fuengirola, and agreed between themselves that the Spanish health service is very good, and treats older people better. 'You are not cast aside when you are old here, like you are at home' said Anita, the single woman, 'in Wales I am sure the elderly wait longer to see a specialist than the young do'.

For older people the attractions of Spain over Britain include, as discussed above, the advantages to health of a good climate and the opportunity to be more active. Many also cite Spain's relative cheapness as an advantage; you can get more for your money, they would tell me. A lot of this is to do with the exchange rate between the pound and the peseta, but crucially, the things which make life enjoyable— wine, beer, cigarettes, eating out, leisure activities – are cheaper regardless of the exchange rate. For young, single people the attractions of Spain are obvious. There is more to do, the sun shines more, which means there are more hours in a day, people are happier and more free. I met several young people involved in the timeshare business and others working as couriers for whom this kind of work and Spain together offered fun, sunshine, laughter and a feeling of freedom. They contrasted this with work life in Britain, which they saw as 'dull, routine, boring and monotonous'.

Interestingly, it is a new-found anonymity that attracts some people. Tony told me that everyone in the village he lived in knew him as the retired policeman, and no one could relate to him in any other way, until he came to live in Spain and was able to be 'just plain Tony again'. Eileen, on the other hand, was an old maid in her home town: sixty years old and never married. She came to Spain, made loads of new friends and was accepted as a single person, she said. Even better than that, it was okay for her to go into pubs on her own! Fred had lived a life of petty crime and was ostracised in his home town, as he put it. In Spain, no one knew his past and he was able to start again with a clean slate.

For the returning migrants the stories they tell about coming to Spain on a regular basis focus on the advantages Spain has to offer. However, their stories also include reasons for not moving to Spain more permanently. Phyllis and Stuart, who visit Los Boliches each year for six or seven months, told me that they would love to come to Spain to live but they would miss their grandchildren too much. Tom, a gay man in his fifties, said he liked to come to Spain with his partner, where they felt they could relax more than at home, but they couldn't afford to live there permanently. More than one man told me he would settle permanently in Spain but his wife wouldn't leave her family and friends, and more than one woman told me she would love to live in Spain but was afraid of loneliness.

Those who have settled more permanently, on the other hand, never want to go home. As Derek, a retired Returning Resident, told me: "People may go home because they have to, for different reasons, but no one ever *wants* to go home. That's the truest thing you'll ever hear". And during fieldwork I was warned over and over again, 'you won't want to go home, no one ever does'. Indeed, a commitment to Spain is part of the community identity, that distinguishes the insiders from the outsiders, and anyone who did want to go home would only admit this privately and with regret (O'Reilly 2000b).

Integration

So, are these Europeans who have migrated freely across internal borders indicative of a new, integrated Europe? Well, despite the fact that there is no myth of return and no romantic longing for home, and even a strong identification with Spanish culture, Britons living in Fuengirola cannot be considered integrated within wider Spanish society, either in terms of ethnic identity or in more concrete actions. British bars are full of British customers and British clubs full of British members. Leisured Britons, with time on their hands for 'lazing around', can be seen spending this time with other Britons in clubs and bars, on the beach or making visits to Gibraltar. There are British

clubs for almost every interest and activity: bowls clubs, a cricket club, an arts centre, a Scottish country dancing club, bridge clubs, a theatre group, Brownie Guides, walking clubs, social clubs, fund-raising groups, and many more. The majority of the members are British. Clubs run by other nationalities - Spanish bars, the local pensioners club, and the *Casa de la Cultura* (Spanish arts centre and local centre for culture and adult education) for example - see only a minority of British people in the way of members, visitors or customers. There are even an Anglican church and a British cemetery in the area. There is a British baker shop, and English and Scottish butcher shops, an English grocery store called 'A Taste of England', and an English book shop. For many British, daily life involves talking to and being with other British people and very little interaction with the Spanish (O'Reilly 2000a).

Some commentators have tried to suggest this is a modern form of colonialism. However, the area of land to which these Britons have moved is governed neither by the country or state from which they emigrate nor by the migrants themselves; nor are they subject only to British jurisdiction (though this is a complex issue). Neither is the situation one of more subtle economic domination or control as in the case of a situation often referred to nowadays as 'neo-colonialism'. In fact, the economic situation and market activity of many migrants is marginal, with most either living on British pensions or working in the informal economy (O'Reilly 2000b). Nor is it helpful to conceptualise these migrants as expatriates in the usual sense of the word, which endows the recipient with wealth, power, privilege and status (see Findlay 1995). Neither are they reconstructing 'a little England in the sun'. Most of the migrants, as discussed above, are glad to have moved away from Britain and though they identify with other British and draw on some symbols of Britishness, they also identify strongly with what they see as Spanish values, of community, caring and responsibility, and with the slow pace of Spanish life.

It is important not to forget the history of the migration trend. Britons were not attracted to Spain's coastal areas in order either to work or to integrate into Spanish society. They were first invited as tourists when the coastal areas were marketed and 'sold' as holiday places. Then, when it became apparent that tourism only offered seasonal income and when foreign investment was sought as a boost to the Spanish economy, foreigners were encouraged to buy and to settle in these coastal areas - but always as retirees, or visitors, or as entrepreneurs building and expanding their own businesses, not as labour supply, nor for refuge or asylum as many migrants have been in the past. Nor did they come uninvited as imperialists or political colonisers, in the way that Britons (and of course other Westerners, including the Spanish) have been in the past.

Neither do these migrants have much political or economic power. In fact they are excluded from the main Spanish institutions. Britons in Spain have no power to vote in general elections and were slow to be granted the right, in Fuengirola at least, to vote in the local elections. European Union members were to have been given the right to vote in the local elections in 1995 but there were many obstacles to registering themselves on the electoral register, and eventually even those few who had managed to gain the correct papers were denied the right to vote at the last minute due to bureaucratic details and the failure of the two governments involved to agree reciprocal arrangements. By 1999, Fuengirola had got its act together and EU members had the right to vote locally and in European elections, but national elections remain the prerogative of nationals. As Yasemin Soysal (1996) points out, this lack of extension of national voting rights to resident foreigners is what differentiates them

from national citizens. Full rights of citizenship are further limited by the fact that European residents must prove they are financially independent or independent in terms of social security before being granted the right to remain in the host country (Martiniello 1995). No matter how one is accepted in the new country, one remains, in terms of citizenship, a member of one's own country first and foremost.

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